

'Fulfilling and
Australian as a lamb roast
and full-bodied shiraz'

*The Australian
Women's Weekly*



THE
SHELLY BAY
LADIES
SWIMMING
CIRCLE

SOPHIE GREEN

CHAPTER 1

Theresa screws up her nose as she approaches the water. She knows it's going to be cold. It may be spring but the ocean will still be feeling the effect of Antarctic currents. Are they from Antarctica? Someone told her that once. And they're cold enough to be. Or maybe they're from Bass Strait. Or South America or something. She can't remember exactly, but she does remember what it was like all those years ago when she was a Nipper right here at Main Beach, learning how to read rips and run down the sand and swim fast so she could save lives in the water. She never did grow up to be a surf lifesaver but the memories of the water being cold in November have lingered.

She breathes in deeply and clasps her hands behind to stretch out her arms and shoulders. That's what you're meant to do before exercise, isn't it? Stretch? She's seen swimmers do it on the telly, during the Olympics. Lisa Curry, in Moscow. Theresa isn't kidding herself: she's never going to be able to swim like Lisa Curry. But she's here. She's stretching. Small steps.

As she feels the tug around her chest and shoulders she looks towards the horizon, where shades of yellowy-orange are starting to appear. The sun isn't quite up yet but there's

enough light for her to see the long stretch of beach to the left of where she stands, all the way to Kings End.

Behind the beach is the concrete that forms the wall and the walkway, and pine trees that are far older than she is but don't belong here anyway, because they're Norfolk Island pines and this beach is a long way from an island that's closer to New Zealand than Australia. Out of sight to her now, but just around the corner, is Little Beach. That's her goal – to swim to Little Beach. Not today. Some day. Soon. She should probably set herself a more realistic goal for today. Maybe swim from this end of the beach to halfway along, then back. That's not too far. Not as far as she used to swim when they went to the pool for school sport. She was all right at swimming back then.

You're stalling.

Ah, yes – there's that little annoying voice she's been fighting all week, ever since it told her she had to start *doing something*. To get fit. To lose weight.

She knows she needs to – it isn't healthy to be overweight and no man would find her attractive if she was. Her mother had told her that each time Theresa had walked into the kitchen in her school uniform and reached for a piece of cake.

Her mother had liked to bake cakes but hadn't eaten them, and had expected Theresa to follow her example. 'You can never be too rich or too thin,' was her constant advice, cadged from the Duchess of Windsor. Theresa's brothers, on the other hand, could eat as much cake as they liked. In fact, the cakes were baked *for* them.

So Theresa knows she needs to lose a bit. She just didn't need her husband to add his voice to the one in her head. But he did anyway.

Andrew – Andy, Ando, Ands to his mates – had sat on the couch a few weeks ago, his newly burgeoning beer gut spilling

over the top of his King Gees and out the bottom of the dirty white Bonds singlet he wore around the house, a tinny in one hand and the other idly flipping through the form guide in the paper while he ogled Delvene Delaney wearing a bikini on *The Paul Hogan Show*. He'd looked Theresa up and down as she'd entered the room carrying his dinner on a tray so he could keep perverting at Delvene while he ate.

'You're puttin' on a bit,' he pronounced, then looked appraisingly at the food she was offering. 'What are those – cutlets?' Then he'd made a face like he didn't want cutlets, although she knew, because she's been married to him for a while now, that he loves them.

She'd glared at him and slammed the tray down near enough to his testicles to be a threat. 'Yes, they're cutlets.'

He'd grinned, then winked at her. That grin and the wink had worked better when he used to be handsome. Of course, in his own mind he still was.

She'd spun away from him only to feel his hand grabbing her wrist. 'Hold yer horses,' he said, putting his tinny down on the card table next to him. That's how she knew he wanted to have a serious conversation. 'I didn't mean to upset you.'

Perhaps. But she knew he'd meant what he said. Because he'd said it before, and not just when Delvene was on the screen.

Theresa can't say he's wrong. She's a little plumper than she used to be, but she's had two kids, and they cut the second one out of her, so what does he expect? Still, she's resolved to do something about it. Not because she doesn't like the way she looks, but because she's sick of feeling the way she feels: slow, stodgy – and old. She's only thirty-eight but she feels a hundred most days. She wants to have – *needs* to have – more energy to run around after her children, whom she loves even if they get on her nerves.

She should be more grateful for the kids: her cheeky boy, Oliver, and her sweet girl, Sasha. She almost lost Sasha. When she was born the cord was wrapped around her neck and Theresa saw the end of her dream of having a daughter named Alexandra and nicknamed Sasha. She'd always wanted that, ever since there'd been a Russian girl in her class who was known to all as Sasha – then Theresa had found out her real name. It had seemed so cosmopolitan to have a 'diminutive' name, as she'd also learnt to call it. And she wanted to be cosmopolitan. Still wants to be. She wants to have a racy life. To zip around the world without any cares. Maybe with that dishy Tom Burlinson she's just seen in that new film *The Man from Snowy River*. It wasn't much like the poem she loved so much in school but that doesn't bother her, because sometimes, when she's alone, she thinks about Tom riding that horse straight down that mountainside . . .

So she's decided to take her inspiration from Olivia Newton-John and get physical. Just not the way Livvy did it, with a leotard and sweatband worn like John McEnroe's. Swimming is the only sporting activity Theresa liked as a kid, so it was to swimming she decided to turn two nights ago, when the voice of conscience had a small victory and she made her big decision and hoped she could stick to it. From now until the end of summer she's going to have a sunrise swim. Every day, she's decided. No backing down – not unless the conditions are truly unfavourable.

Andrew and the kids will sleep through the whole thing, up in their little house on the ridge between Kings End and the next beach, Sunrise. And if the kids wake up, Andrew will just have to deal with them. For a change. It's not as if she doesn't have to deal with them most nights of the week when he stays out drinking with his mates after work and comes in smelling of beer and, mysteriously, Brut 33. She's never seen a bottle of it in the house.

This morning she almost decided to make swimming a New Year's resolution instead, but she knows that if she delays until January summer will be almost half gone and she might lose her nerve. This way she has a few weeks of getting in the water and seeing just how fit she can become.

For a second or two, she'd wondered if she should invite a friend to join her – then she'd remembered that all her friends are as wrapped up with their children as she is. None of them has time for each other any more. She's planning to hold on until the kids are in high school and then they can all reconnect. Her mum told her that's about how long it takes for everyone to 'get past the worst of it'.

'G'day, Tess,' she hears from her right, and doesn't need to look to know it's Trevor King, the unelected ruler of the Shelly Bay Surf Club. He's run the Nippers programs for years, and even taught Theresa herself how not to drown in a rip. She doesn't mind him. He's just a bit narrow in his thinking, the way Andrew is. The way she worries she'll become if she keeps hanging around with narrow-minded people.

'G'day, Trev,' she says, making an effort to sound friendly, even though she wants to tell him – the way she always wants to tell him – that she can't stand being called Tess. She is Theresa, like her grandmother. He, on the other hand, has always been Trev, not Trevor; just like Andrew is never Andrew to anyone but her.

'Nice day for it,' Trev says.

It's the same thing he says every time she sees him. Even when she was standing on the sand watching her own kids go through their drills and it was bucketing down, he'd say it was a nice day. But she supposes he's cheerful. Maybe that's not a bad thing.

As he draws close Theresa averts her eyes from his Speedos, which she suspects he's bought a size too small so he can make

the most of his crown jewels. Because it isn't the Koh-i-Noor diamond he's got stuffed inside his cossie.

'Too right,' she says with a tight smile and a tighter wave, hoping he'll leave her alone now. She doesn't want to chat. She is standing here in her old one-piece, which has gone threadbare underneath her boobs and won't withstand close inspection. *She* won't withstand close inspection. But all that is going to change. She will do this swim today, and then she's going to get a new cossie at the mall later this afternoon and it will help her feel more positive about this mission she's set herself.

Theresa takes a step into the foam and realises she's holding her breath.

Another step in and the white water brushes against her shins. It isn't as cold as she feared. Not yet.

She watches the waves building. She has to time it right – she doesn't want to get out there and meet the biggest wave of the set. She might never have become a surf lifesaver but she learnt about the water. How to be watchful. How to be cautious. Lessons she sometimes thinks she should have applied to her life.

There's the break in the set she's looking for, so she wades in quickly and dives under. At this depth the water is indeed as cold as she feared and she gasps. Still, this is the price she has to pay to be gorgeous in a bikini. *Cleo* and *Cosmo* tell her that she has to suffer to be beautiful. Which is why she reads the *Women's Weekly* instead and makes biscuits from their recipes.

Nevertheless, she is here now, and she's going to swim a few metres and see how she gets on. She isn't going to transform into an athlete overnight. But if she just keeps thinking about Tom Burlinson on that horse, she's sure she'll have enough motivation to get there soon.

CHAPTER 2

Marie rubs a towel through her hair as she gazes at her unruly back garden. Every day, after she's had her swim and her shower, she dries her hair looking at this garden and she really doesn't know why. Despite the lovely flowers – frangipanis in summer, camellias in autumn, azaleas in winter, plum blossom in spring and hibiscus year round – it's not a pretty picture. The weeds are taking over and she has never learnt to prune the trees properly. Norm used to do that, and after he died there was no one else. Just like there's no one to swim with her any more. Her habit of a lifetime became his too; became theirs. Now it's hers alone once more. As is the garden.

She's thought about getting someone in to tidy it up but she can't afford it. She can't afford much of anything now that she's on the age pension with no savings. Which is her fault. Hers and Norm's. They didn't really plan for the future.

'Charlie Brown, what are you doing?' She bends down to scratch behind the ears of her Sydney silky terrier as he snuffles between her feet.

Marie's best friend, Gwen, brought Charlie Brown into her life. Gwen's daughter had bought a puppy from the breeder who owned him. Charlie Brown was meant to be a show dog

but the breeder had decided he wasn't good enough for that. Marie didn't want to know what the breeder had planned for a dog who wasn't show-worthy, so she swooped in and offered to take him. Even offered money, but the breeder refused it, saying that Marie was doing him a favour by removing a problem. Ever since then Marie has counted herself as the lucky one, although she gives Norm the credit – from somewhere beyond he looked after her, she's sure of it. That's why she gave Charlie Brown that name: *Peanuts* was Norm's favourite comic strip.

'I'm going to the shops,' she tells the dog. 'Will you be a good boy while I'm away?'

He looks up at her, his hair – it's too thin to be called fur – flopping near his eyes, and she knows that he will not be good. He'll curl up on her bed even though he's not allowed to, and she will forgive him, as she always does, because he's her only companion now.

Gwen and Marie have lived within walking distance of each other their whole lives, but several months ago Gwen moved into a retirement village a few too many suburbs to the north. Norm's been gone for five years now, and their daughter, Nicole, lives on the other side of town, across the harbour. So Marie's most regular conversations are with the dog. He doesn't seem to mind.

Marie quickly eats her hard-boiled egg on toast and gulps down her tea, wanting to get to the greengrocer when it opens. That's when the fruit and veg will be straight off the truck from the markets. She knows that because Norm used to be the greengrocer in the very same shop. His shop. He sold it seven years ago; two years after that he was gone. So much for a leisurely retirement.

She picks up her string bags from the kitchen counter and tries to stop herself waddling towards the front door. Once she

hit sixty her joints started to tighten up, to her dismay. She's been swimming almost every day of her life since she was a child, right here in Shelly Bay, and still her body is ageing. Getting cranky with itself. She's not sure what else she's meant to do to keep it happy. She eats well, she exercises, and she's still getting thick and stiff, just like her mother did, and her mother before her. Maybe she shouldn't bother with the swimming since her genes are lapping her anyway.

Except she loves it. The ocean has always been there for her, on the good days and the bad. There have been a few bad ones in the last five years. And some very bad ones further back in her life. Days she wishes she could forget but which she needs to hold on to, because they are part of her story. Part of who she has become.

Back then, as soon as she was able, she'd returned to the water. Each kick, each stroke, had brought her back to herself; and a couple of years later Nicole arrived in the world and made the sun shine again. She still does that.

'Stay here, Charlie Brown,' Marie says as she gives him a little nudge with her foot and closes the front door on him. He can't come with her because he's not allowed in the shops, and she never likes to tie him up on the footpath. Instead he can have the run of the old sandstone cottage Marie grew up in and inherited from her father because he, too, didn't get the son he dreamt of.

She ignores the out-of-control lavender bushes in her small front garden, closes the gate and sets off down the hill to the village, as the locals call it. She waves to Mrs Morrison on the other side of the road. The older woman's spine makes a C shape but she's still out there, pruning her roses. Putting Marie to shame.

Livingstone Road has been Marie's lifelong artery into the village: it takes her down the hill to the beach and the shops; past the home of the first boy she ever had a crush on; past the playground of her primary school; past the spot on the corner where there used to be a café. She and Norm had their first date in that café. She smiles, thinking of them sitting in the window, him with his big head of dark curls and the scar over his right eye. His brother did it, Norm said, with a cricket bat. He was never sure if it was on purpose or not.

For a while after Norm died Marie couldn't bring herself to go into his old shop, even though it's the closest green-grocer to home. She didn't understand why so she prayed on it, which made her feel better even though she never worked out the reason for her resistance. She went back, and will always remember how happy the new owner was to see her.

As she steps inside today he's organising the peaches.

'Hello, Vince,' she says.

He looks up. 'Marie!' He comes towards her with his arms outstretched, as he always does, as if she's his favourite aunt or something, and gives her a hug, like he's grateful she's in the shop.

What he doesn't know – because it would be too strange to tell him – is that she's grateful he's kept Norm's business going so well.

'What's it going to be today?' he says when he releases her, in that accent he's told her is 'Australian suburbia by way of Calabria'.

She's never told him that she thinks it's taken a detour via dreamy, because what young man wants a crone giving him compliments? She wouldn't want to make him uncomfortable, plus she's never been the flirty kind. She just misses the company of men. Of one man.

‘Half a dozen oranges, please,’ she says, and he starts to pick them up and put them in a basket.

‘You been for a swim this morning, *signora*?’

‘Every morning, Vince.’ Which he knows, because he always asks her. She appreciates the banter, though.

He smiles and shakes his head. ‘I don’t know how you do it. Even in winter?’

‘Even in winter.’

He shakes his head again. ‘It’s too cold for me *now*, *signora* – and it’s almost summer!’

‘The water will warm up soon. You should give it a try.’ She nods towards the end of the street, where pine trees guard the beachfront at almost exactly the spot where she starts her swim each day at sunrise. ‘It’s so close. You could run down there after work. Daylight saving.’

He raises his eyebrows at her.

‘Four bananas,’ she says, and he nods as he selects them carefully.

‘Two tomatoes.’

‘Only two?’ He frowns. ‘What kind of pasta sauce can you make with only two?’

She laughs. It feels good. And rusty. She doesn’t laugh much these days. No one to laugh with. It’s another reason to be grateful to Vince. Although that doesn’t mean she can afford more than two tomatoes.

‘You know I’ll never be able to make a proper sauce,’ she chides gently. ‘I’m not your nonna.’

He winks. ‘She makes the best sauce.’

‘I know. You always tell me.’

She’s almost at the end of her list, after which she’ll turn around and go back up the hill, wearing out that short track her life runs on. Her world has become smaller these last few

years. If only she'd learnt to drive a car, but she never needed to; Norm took her everywhere she wanted to go. Now it's too late to learn, even if it meant she could drive to see Gwen. And Nicole. Her daughter doesn't live far away as the crow flies, but it takes an unreasonably long time to get there when Marie has to take the ferry then the bus then walk a few hundred metres. It uses up the whole day, going to see Nicole and her kids. Marie knows she has whole days to spend – she has all the time in the world – but she's still not visiting. She should make herself, before she gets stuck further in the sludge she sometimes feels is building up around her feet, holding her in her old ways, not letting her move on.

'Thanks, Vince,' she says as he loads her purchases into her string bags.

'It's lovely to see you, Marie.' He pecks her on the cheek. 'I'll look forward to the next time.'

He's such a charmer, and he knows it, but he's made her day. Little points of light are what she lives for now. She gives him a last wave as she steps onto the street.

She can just make out the glint of the sunlight on the ocean, past those pine trees, and for a second she contemplates having another swim today. She might just do that. Or she could go for a walk up to the headland. Give her hips something to really complain about.

She has time. So much time. She should start doing something with it.

CHAPTER 3

‘**K**eeep your head down. That’s it. That’s it! Now kick. Kick!’

Leanne can hardly hear the swimming instructor yelling to her. She has cotton wool doused in lanolin stuffed in her ears and a cap over her head, and the water is rushing past her face as she tries, clumsily, to pull her arms through the water and move her feet at the same time. Freestyle doesn’t feel so free when you’re still learning how to do it.

She thinks Matt says something like ‘Breathe’ but she still can’t hear him. Then she feels his hand on her shoulder and she stops.

‘You’re not breathing,’ he says when she lifts her face from the water. ‘You’ll pass out if you keep that up.’

‘Sorry,’ she says, feeling abashed. She forgets to breathe every single time she’s in this lesson, but never when she’s practising on her own. Perhaps she’s concentrating so hard on what he’s saying that she forgets. Or perhaps in his presence she’s just more self-conscious about doing things right or wrong.

‘No worries,’ he says, his grin wide, his sun-darkened skin looking as though it might crack. His shaggy brown hair hangs almost in his eyes, and he has what appears to be encrusted salt on his eyebrows and eyelashes. He’s like so many of the

young men she sees in the area, although they're usually nearer the beach than this council pool.

It took Leanne many months to get used to how different life in Shelly Bay is to where she grew up, in a landlocked suburb far from the sea where she wasn't the only child who never learnt to swim. Her mother didn't swim either. Her father and brothers did, but they were expected to; her father told her brothers that they'd never grow up to be lifesavers if they didn't. Which was a strange statement, because he wasn't a lifesaver, they never went to the beach and her brothers showed no interest in learning how to save anything. But that's what Aussie blokes did, apparently: they became lifesavers. It was important to her father that her brothers became Aussie blokes. Sometimes Leanne wonders if that's how they turned out, but it's been several years since she has seen any of her family.

'Let's try again,' Matt is saying, although through the cotton wool it's hard to make it out. 'You're doing really well, all right? We just don't want you to drown.'

He laughs and it sounds almost like a honk. She's grown used to his laugh over the past few weeks. He's been her only instructor for the lessons she decided she needed.

As she pushes off the wall and tries to time her strokes properly, she thinks he's probably being kind about her progress. But she's not going to stop just because she's not Shane Gould. She lives in a beachside suburb now and if she can't swim she's not making the most of it. Half of the residents of Shelly Bay are in the water each morning, it seems; each time she goes for a run she can see them ploughing up and down offshore. She wants to try that too. All her life she's been active, and never baulked at a challenge; swimming the length of the beach seems like something she should try. And it will make her a proper local.

Shelly Bay is as different as Leanne could imagine from the place where she grew up. Home was full of streets tightly packed with dark-brick houses and gardens of English plants that usually weren't tended to. There were parks that were mostly patches of dirt with the occasional swing; playing fields that were teeming with rowdy boys on weekends; and streets that were quiet enough for her and her brothers to play cricket on without worrying about cars.

In Leanne's suburb, people mostly stayed inside their houses. It was hot in summer and cold in winter, and those dark bricks were meant to keep everyone's temperature even. In Shelly Bay, the residents seem to be outside all the time. The streets are wide and the houses are set further apart than she's used to, creating a sense of airiness that makes the whole place feel relaxed. And there is so much light: the houses are built of sandstone if they're old, or weatherboard if they're not. Where there's brick, it's blond. The gardens are full of trees and flowers that look like summer: frangipanis with their yellow and white faces; strelitzias, lavender, and freesias on the nature strips. There is scrubby bush nearby, covering the headland and encroaching into people's lives; eucalypts are on every street and there's the occasional stray native plant in front gardens. Leanne grew up with kookaburras and magpies and miners, but here there are more colourful birds too – cockatoos and rainbow lorikeets and king parrots. They obviously prefer the seaside.

Leanne's move to Shelly Bay happened when she took a job at Northern Hospital up on the hill – her first after she finished her nursing degree. She liked paediatrics the best when she was training, so getting a position in the paediatric ward was a dream. And she was glad to move out of the dense city-bound suburbs near the university to the roomier Shelly Bay. She took

a flat on her own and still enjoys the freedom it brings her, to make decisions for herself and how she wants to live.

This place has changed her perspective on life. Before, she felt hemmed in by the past and the decisions she'd made that shaped it. The further away from it she has moved, the more she has begun to believe that she can be a different person – the sort of person who lives in a bright, happy place filled with friendly, open people. With Matt as a prime example.

'Right!' he says, tapping her on the shoulder as she reaches the wall. 'That was pretty good. How are you feeling?'

'Fine,' she says, sniffing water up her nose and tasting the chlorine as it trickles down the back of her throat.

He honk-laughs. 'You don't say much, do you?'

'Not really.' She half smiles but is sure it looks like a grimace.

'I think that's enough for today,' he says. 'But it would be good if you could get some practice in before the next lesson. Okay?'

She nods once, definitely. 'Okay.'

He grins. 'See you next week.'

As Matt heads in the direction of the office Leanne wades to the steps, avoiding a more vigorous swimmer whose freestyle is smooth and swift. She wants to swim like that one day. Soon. Or even just a bit like that, so by the time summer starts she can swim in the ocean and be one of those locals churning their way through the surf.

Maybe then she'll feel like she's really home.

CHAPTER 4

T*hwack.* The ball hits the net and Elaine winces. Another double fault. She risks a glance at her doubles partner and can see how unimpressed she is. As she should be: they've lost two games already because of Elaine's serving.

If Elaine could only work out what she's doing wrong she'd fix it, except she was never this lousy when she used to play at home. Since she and her husband moved to Australia a few months ago, she's lost . . . something. Not her abilities: she refuses to believe that. She's been playing tennis since she was a child and her game is automatic now. Perhaps that's the problem: it was automatic *in England*. A change of country has changed all the parameters she's used to. She's not so much a fish out of water as a mermaid marooned on dry land. Or so she'd like to think. It's a more glamorous idea than the truth, which is that she's wretchedly miserable living in the southern hemisphere and the deficit in her tennis game is the least of it. Yet it's the most tangible part of it, so it's what she's working on. Even if there's been no improvement since last week's ladies doubles round robin.

'How about I serve from now on?' Marguerite says with a pinched look on her face, and although Elaine wants to protest,

and make it clear that she's not usually this hopeless *really*, it wouldn't be fair. Because she's hopeless right now.

'Sure,' she replies breezily and forces a smile that she is sure looks as fake as it feels. 'I'm clearly having a bad day.'

Marguerite sniffs and Elaine thinks she can translate: in short, Marguerite doesn't believe that she ever has good days.

It gives Elaine no satisfaction that while Marguerite can serve the ball over the net, she isn't much good at hitting it thereafter, so they lose the match anyway.

'Thank you,' Elaine says as she shakes hands with their opponents over the net, then with Marguerite. 'Next week?' she adds.

She really doesn't want to play with them again, but she hasn't managed to find another group activity that suits her, and if she doesn't play tennis she will have absolutely no one to talk to apart from James, who works all day and half the night. Not that she isn't used to it. He did that in England, too, and she didn't expect that returning to his homeland would change him. A surgeon's work is never done, or something like that. His wife's wait is never over.

'Um, well . . .' Marguerite exchanges looks with the others. The sorts of looks normally seen on cruel schoolgirls in a playground. 'The thing is, Elaine . . .'

Marguerite pats her on the arm, a gesture that Elaine finds both patronising and intrusive. Playing tennis together does not confer a level of familiarity that allows for patting. She wonders if shifting away from Marguerite will look rude.

'We have a friend who wants to play with us,' says one of the others – Cheryl, Elaine thinks it is.

Cheryl and Beryl. Elaine thought it was a joke when they told her, but apparently not, and ever since she has rarely been able to remember which one is which – a predicament

not helped by the fact that they are both bottle blondes, both play tennis wearing, improbably, boob tubes in combination with tiny ellesse skirts and socks with pink pom-poms on the backs, and both have husbands called Barry. They go to ‘the Services’ on the weekend – a club, Elaine believes, on the bluff at Sunrise Beach – where the Barrys play ‘the pokies’ and bet on ‘the dogs’ and ‘the trots’.

Marguerite’s husband is known as Bluey. This, Elaine has learnt, is because he has red hair. James tried to explain it to her but she felt too overwhelmed to understand; the steep cultural learning curve she has found herself on ever since moving to Australia has generally had the effect of making her feel simultaneously stupid, tired and resentful. But she’s persevered these last few weeks, despite not having anything in common with these women apart from the fact that they have all played tennis since childhood, and now here they are turfing her out of their foursome. She wishes she felt more relieved because she doesn’t want to play with them again, either, but being rejected is never pleasant.

‘Is that so?’ she says, trying to sound nonchalant but instead sounding like she’s swallowing a plum.

‘Yeah.’ Cheryl – or Beryl – inspects her chipped fingernail polish. ‘Kel. You met Kel. She plays mixed doubles sometimes.’

Elaine recalls a tiny woman with a perm growing out and a faded navy-blue Lacoste T-shirt. ‘Right. Kel.’ She smiles quickly. ‘So I imagine that leaves no room for me?’

‘We’ll call you if we have a spot,’ Marguerite says, and Elaine steps away as she sees another pat coming.

‘Fine.’ She tries to smile brightly but feels she probably looks startled instead. ‘Thank you for letting me play with you.’

‘No worries!’ says the other Cheryl/Beryl. ‘See you round.’

You will never see me round, Elaine wants to snap. She has never been round in her life apart from her two pregnancies. Well-brought-up young ladies aren't supposed to eat. That's why they drink instead – the calories have to come from somewhere.

It's a drink she's thinking of as she almost trots away from the courts. Her daily gin-and-tonic ritual that she never used to let herself start before six o'clock. It's been creeping in earlier – only because she's lonely, and bored despite the plethora of novels she's been ploughing through; and so many nights she's already asleep by the time James gets home, which means he's not likely to find out that she's drinking more than she used to. Unless he's checking the bottle she keeps on the sideboard. She'll have to start using a decoy bottle.

She walks back up the hill to Francis Street, wishing that she'd brought the car. But that would make her lazy: the courts are only ten minutes' walk from home. Not that their proximity matters any more. She's hardly going to look for another group to play with.

Perhaps there are other courts nearby . . . But then she might face the same problem: women who don't really want her there, and her game not up to scratch. There's more entertainment to be found at home with her books. Maybe she should get a dog. They haven't had a dog since the boys were little.

As she reaches the top of the hill she sighs and turns around so she can look past the rooftops of the village shops and flats, past the spire of the church, St Mary's Immaculate, to the ocean. Today it is a rich blue and, given the warmth of this November day, looks incredibly inviting.

She can take up swimming. It was her favourite sport at school, and she was good at it. Not a group sport, true, so she's not going to make friends by swimming on her own. However, she hasn't made friends trying to be part of a team. She was

always a better singles than doubles player – she should have remembered that.

Tomorrow morning she's going to get in the water. Or maybe the day after, because she'll need a cap and goggles if she's going to take this seriously and that requires a trip to the shops.

This afternoon, the only thing she's going to take seriously is that gin and tonic. She sets off in strides towards home, with quinine and slices of lemon on her mind.

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**THE SHELLY BAY LADIES
SWIMMING CIRCLE**

by Sophie Green

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